FALL FROM GRACE.

AN EVIDENCE TABLE ARCHIVES STORY

Barrie J. Wakeford

2026

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Fully spell, grammar & punctuation checked, although there may be some errors.
The stories are written in my voice and it's not perfect. So neither is this book.

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Fall from grace.

Authors note

The detective in this story is a fictional one from another of my stories. I wrote a short story featuring my 'Dashing Drag Detective' who lives and works in Benidorm, a seaside town on the Costa Blanca Spain. Unfortunately, he now has his own story, within a story. This one was not suitable for either Clive, or my London based 'Shy Private Eye' I hope you enjoy this. BJW

November is a strange month in the UK; one day it might be warm and dry, the next wet and windy.

But at dawn on that November day, it was extremely cold and damp.

The sea was as flat as a millpond, the only waves were being caused by the gulls who attempted to land on its mottled surface. The water gently bumped the jagged rocks at the cliff face, and someone who stood at the bottom would see nothing but the uncompromising and unclimbable rocks that faced the sea. The body at the bottom was, however, not looking at anything; it was shattered and laid across the rocks. Its torso floated in the water and the tide licked at it as if it were a sweet covered in hair from a pocket. Far above and standing guard at the top of the cliff was Whetstone House.

Detective Reginald Grayson arrived at the scene in a small rowing boat; the two constables on duty were huddled against the cliff and were sharing a cigarette. What they had done wrong this time was the topic of conversation, as neither thought standing on the rocks guarding a dead body was necessary. In that respect they were right, and as the boat bumped the rock. The celebrated detective Grayson stepped ashore, his fine, chiseled features highlighted by the tan gained from his last escapade in Tunisia. His

exploits were well known, and the constables stood to attention as he approached. One of them could not help noticing the rather inappropriate footwear the detective had on his feet. He too must have felt the questioning glance and retorted.

“Playing tennis, don’t you know, with the maharaja of Kalpesh. Rubbish forehand, but his lob is as good as any you will see. What do we have here then, lads?”

One of them mumbled that it was bloody obvious even to a world-renowned sleuth, but he kept it low.

“Suspected death by falling off the cliff, sir.” Said the other one.

“Hmm,” mused Grayson, “I would say it's not the fall that killed him, more likely the rocks he hit here at the bottom.” And he smiled as he always did when he thought he was being witty.

Detective Reginald Grayson had a rather high opinion of himself; in his eyes, he was the world’s best detective. Why, kings and queens called him personally, and he had only agreed to look at this as the chief constable was an old bridge-playing buddy. He couldn't see what the fuss was; the silly blighter probably misjudged his footing and fell off. Grayson strode back to the boat and barked to the oarsman to take him to the beach. The two constables went back to watching the body, its arm resting in the water, waving Grayson goodbye as the tide swelled as the boat was rowed away.

From the beach another constable took Grayson to Whetstone House, and he stood and looked at its impressive facade. There was a boom from the town and the gulls flew off screaming.

Grayson never hurried; he walked back along the drive and checked the iron gate. He followed the hedge on both sides and then finally worked his way around to the rear of the house. As he walked he noted every visible window and method of ingress and egress, for a man like Grayson tended to believe that there were

always more of one than the other. He finally turned and was faced with the rear wall of the house and the sheer drop from the cliff. The boundary hedge, composed of blackthorn and holly, stretched continuously and thickly on both sides, seemingly impenetrable. Sergeant Jolly was waiting for him, and he smiled as the man approached.

“You see the problem, Sir?” He asked.

Grayson placed his broad shoulders against the cold, damp brickwork and paced forwards; three average-sized steps, and he almost teetered over the edge.

Sergeant Jolly said. “The man on the rocks had no wallet, and his clothes, while practical, are not those of a hiker, and he couldn't have been climbing, as he was not dressed for it either.”

Grayson frowned and replied. “So how did he end up down there? I assume he is unknown to the residents of the house?”

“That is correct, sir,” said Jolly. “They have been preparing to close up the house for the winter and head back to London. This has put a dent in their plans.”

“Shall we interview them and get out of this wind?” Suggested Grayson, and he stomped away.

As they entered Whetstone House; the air inside carried a faint damp smell, wood polish, sea salt, and it was cold and barren.

Three people were stood waiting for him at the foot of the stairs; they looked bored and restless. Grayson took them in with his customary stare. He sized them up instantly and, as usual, was well off the mark.

Standing in the center was Valerie Walsh, the widowed owner of the house; she was composed and measured, but right now she wanted answers. When she spoke, it was with a measure of restraint.

“Sergeant, have you found out why there is a dead man at the foot of my cliff?”

The sergeant shuffled slightly and looked at Grayson; obviously Mrs. Walsh was used to being answered truthfully.

“My dear lady,” began Grayson, “the body on the rocks has not yet been identified, and we had wondered if you might shed some light on how he managed to become, as you so rightly put it, ‘at the bottom of your cliff,’ as it were?”

“How would I be expected to know the answer to that, and who are you?” She asked with razor blades in her voice.

Grayson bowed and presented his card. Valerie glanced at it, and the corners of her mouth moved to a smile, something she did not do often.

“Well, he must have climbed the hedge or entered through the gate. How are we supposed to know?” She said.

“True,” replied Grayson, “but I have had the opportunity to quickly examine both the gates and the hedge; not much would get through that unless invited.”

Grayson then turned his attention to the other two; both had stayed quiet while Valarie Walsh had spoken.

Clara Hanks was Valarie's niece; she stood tall, thin, and worried. She would not have looked out of place in a Victorian drama, and her dress sense was also suitable for the time period. Her makeup was sparse but it highlighted her cheekbones and small mouth. She had a habit of biting her bottom lip as if she expected bad news.

The other person was a stocky and well-proportioned man, obviously the groundskeeper and odd-job man. He had the look of someone who was continuously being blamed for things going wrong or missing. He was dressed for the outdoors, and his trousers had string tied around the ankles.

Grayson’s questions to them became simple, relentless, and, on the whole, inconspicuous. None of them had seen anything; the usual routines, all the doors were locked, and there had been no

strangers. A building company had been engaged to renovate one of the bedrooms, but they had finished a few days ago. The house was in the process of being shut up for the rest of the winter. They were all shocked that a man had fallen from the cliff to the rocks. But none could give a reason how he had come to do it.

Sergeant Jolly and two more constables searched the house from top to bottom; it was, as Valarie had said, intact. Nothing was reported as missing, and all they found was dust and spiders' webs. There were, of course, the extensive cellars, but Valarie assured Grayson that these were not used and he would find nothing of value there. This made him want to search them anyway.

The cellars were dank and damp; the lower part had been dug out of the hillside, and bedrock could be seen. There were large empty rooms, small side rooms, and a couple of cupboard-sized ones. Three small heaters were arranged around the room; none had gas bottles, so could not be used.

Grayson paced the cellars and stopped; he then retraced his steps. Something was off; from the outside, the lower parts of the walls followed the shape of the house, but here in the cellars, one dimension was off. He said nothing and went back upstairs and paced the floor; he was now sure.

Back in the cellars, Grayson and the constables searched the walls; there was nothing obvious, no cracks, no sign of obviously new mortar. That was something that was worrying Grayson; it should have been obvious. He paced the room; he was certain that the cellar was some four to six feet shorter than it was upstairs. And then he saw it; around two feet below the ceiling, there was a faint colour change in the plaster on this wall. As if it had been reapplied in haste and fairly recently at that.

The constables found ladders, and the plaster was easily removed, and behind was a paneled section. Inside was a small room that was tall enough to stand in, just. The air inside was stale

and smelled slightly of rotten eggs. It was obvious someone had been in this room, Grayson noted a slight draught coming from somewhere in the far wall. There was a narrow mattress and some bottled water and cans of food, which littered the space. There was also a torch and a notebook, which was full of little sketches all showing where the house's treasures were placed. A column of numbers suggested an order of some kind, and on more than one page was the word 'Patience.' Someone had obviously made themselves at home for some reason.

Grayson asked Sergeant Jolly to contact the constables by the body and for them to check the man's boots for dirt or cement. He then examined the floor and all of the walls. He noticed the dust in the places it should have been and the places where it was absent, and he smiled again. He knelt by the joint in the wall and the staircase, and he nodded his head. He then imagined the man in the room, listening for the sounds of the house to go quiet, biding his time, waiting for the moment to emerge. Grayson shone his torch at the ceiling and seemed satisfied. He then walked back out of the room and did the same in the main part of the cellar.

When this was complete, he placed his hands behind his back and pronounced.

"It is clear to me that the man at the foot of the cliff was also the man who has been in the little room over there; he had been there no more than two days. Valarie, when did the builders leave?"

Valerie jumped. "Oh well, it was two days ago, but there were only two of them, and I saw them out of the house. Do you mean that a third man was lodged here in the cellars with me and Clara alone here with him?"

"Madam, please console yourself," Grayson said. "This man was not here to do you harm. Indeed, I deduce that his purpose was

to wait for you to leave and shut up the house; he would then have ample time to remove all the items he wanted at leisure."

"A robbery," cried Clara, "nothing more, just a sordid little robbery. How appalling."

"Yes," he replied, "just a sordid robbery, but for him it would mean death. Not something he had planned on happening." Grayson stopped, and here was the problem. There was no sign of struggle, no injuries in the room, and the room was sealed. So how did the man end up dashed at the bottom of the cliff?

It was, it seemed, an impossible puzzle. So Grayson decided to start again; he asked Sergeant Jolly to take the three off to the kitchens and make tea.

He started again; he mapped the whole of the ground floor to see if there was a possibility of a priest's hole anywhere, or a secret passageway, but no, there was nothing. He studied the mortar in the walls of the cellar, just to see if any was a different shade or texture. He waited until it got dark and then went and sat in the little room; he put himself in the place of the man. He felt the cold of the walls and the claustrophobic room, but it was all for nothing.

He turned back to his three suspects, but how any one of them could have magically taken a man from the room and cast him off to his death was confusing at best. Could they have worked together? But what was the point? They could and should have just informed the police that there was someone holed up in the house, and when the man appeared, the police could have pounced.

Time to ask some more questions, and so this time he started with the shy but alert Clara.

"Clara," he began, "could you tell me what your movements were over the past two days?"

Clara pondered slightly, and Grayson got the impression this woman never said anything in haste. She looked at a point just over his left shoulder and answered in a rather mechanical tone.

“Let me see, today is Thursday, and so on Tuesday I was packing my clothes for the trip back to the London house.” She stopped for a moment. “Only the house is not really in London, I suppose; it’s close, but it’s in Middlesex. Aunt Valarie inherited it from some maiden aunt, but we cannot afford to live there all year, and it's rented out in the summer and autumn months. This place takes so much to keep going as well. But Aunt Valarie says she would not think of selling.”

Grayson made small noises of encouragement, and he then said. “Why not sell the London house and put the money into a proper central heating system for this house?”

Clara looked at him directly for the first time. “I wouldn't know why not, but it's not my decision; if it were, I would sell both and live rather well on the proceeds in the town. There is no life here at all.”

Grayson noted that she seemed to hate the idea of living in the house, but that could just be due to it being so far away from the town and its life.

Thomas was the easiest one to talk to, and he had that brusk way about him—honest country folk, some might say. Wylie, old sod, most would know him as.

Grayson asked the same question and got a similar answer; he had been helping to shut the house up for the winter. He would then head along the coast and stay with his sister until the ladies returned in March. No, he hadn't seen anyone lurking around, and he was just as shocked as the ladies to find a hidden room and a dead body at the bottom of the cliff.

Satisfied for now, Grayson went in search of Valarie Walsh. He found her in the drawing room covering furniture with dust sheets. He asked her what her movements had been, and she replied.

“I have been busying myself with shutting the house; the men who did the bedroom left a mess, and I had to clean that up. Cook

went home a week ago, and we have been living off cold cuts and heating soup on the stove. This house and the London one are a huge drain on my finances, but what can one do?"

Grayson offered the solution of selling one or the other property. He even forwarded Clara's idea but made it seem as if it were his suggestion.

"But we could not do any of those things, Detective." Exclaimed Valarie. "We have been in this area for hundreds of years, and it would not do to sell or even rent out Whetstone House. Nobody is going to make me do that."

Grayson caught a touch of malice in that last comment, and he wondered if there was any chance that this woman could have killed the man. Flinging him over the edge—that certainly would fit her profile. But he could not see how she could have magically removed him from the room; well, she unless she had help, and that thought had crossed his mind.

Grayson asked Sergeant Jolly to join him outside, and he asked a simple question.

"Jolly, if you were going to do this crime, how would you go about it?"

The sergeant scratched his greying head of hair. He was well acquainted with the deductive reasoning of Reginald Grayson, and for him to be asking, 'Why then?' he must have already worked it out.

"Well," he began, in that voice only long-serving police officers used. "if it were I, then under cover of darkness and while my two mates were engaged in renovating the bedroom. I would steal into the cellars, and one of said mates would help me block up the area to form the wall. I noticed, as I am sure you did, that there was a slight gap at the stairs to allow air in. Right at the bottom, sir." Jolly smiled as he remembered Grayson kneeling down at the same spot. "I would have bided my time and counted off the hours. And

when I was sure the house was still and empty, then I would have struck and removed the goods. Is that how you see it, sir?"

Grayson was impressed; he had not realised that Jolly had seen the small round pipe in the wall. But had he noticed the other item that was missing from the cellar?

They headed back outside, as Grayson was now sure he had most of the facts; he just wanted to ensure he was right.

He ordered a sweep of the cliffside and bushes that grew around the outer side of the house. The constables checked the walls and peered over the cliff, as if looking for caves in its sheer side. One of the constables was peering at a bush that seemed to be far denser than it ought to be; he called over Sergeant Jolly and Grayson. Behind the screen of the thorn bushes they found an old, narrow passage; it had old, worn steps and was exactly what Grayson had hoped to find. The solution as to how was now complete; now all Grayson needed was to discover why and who, and the case would then be complete.

Returning to the house, he again examined the dust in the room; it was there that he saw it. He lifted the mattress and saw a patch that looked like it had been roughened up by something grating over it. The wall looked solid, and it was. However, there was a faint line and a definite look as if some of the motor had been recently repointed; it was faint, and anyone who was not looking would never have found it.

The conclusion came to him in a flash: the house was to be locked up for the winter; it would be empty; the robber would have time to steal and dispose of the loot. What if he was in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Smiling to himself, Grayson headed back upstairs and spoke to Sergeant Jolly; who went to the telephone and made a couple of calls.

"How did you know, sir?" He asked.

“Deduction, and I suppose there are two trips planned by two different companies over the next couple of weeks?”

Jolly looked at Grayson in awe. “Yes, sir, one for next Saturday, a small fishing vessel owned by the brother of the builders, and another…” But Grayson stopped him before he could continue.

It had now started raining and when Grayson gathered the household in the long dining room; the drops were beating on the glass, and the room quickly became damp and the air fetid.

“The man at the foot of the cliff bricked himself in with help from one other.” Grayson started, and there were gasps. “And when the police inform the builder that the man is dead, I think we will find that he confesses that they were planning to rob the house while it was shut up and empty.”

Valarie stared at him with those cold eyes; Clara had gasped and was sitting down.

“But he never got the chance to fulfill his purpose; it was a splendid way to ensure he went undetected. Unfortunately, what he and his co-conspirators didn't know was that another plan was already in place.”

He stopped and looked around; Clara was away with the fairies, and Thomas was standing there, rooted to the spot. Grayson allowed the silence to spread; the rain tapping on the window was the only sound.

“But what I think is, someone found out about the hidden man. Maybe not the plan, but anyone would have seen it for what it was. So someone had to get rid of him, and over the cliff was the safest bet and the easiest. No point leaving a dead body in the house; that would raise all sorts of questions.”

Valerie asked. “And why not, Detective? The house has been empty.”

Grayson puffed his chest out and said. “Because, then, how would a dead body and a robbery be explained?”

Again Clara gasped, and there was a flash in Valarie’s eyes.

“It was you.” Grayson said and pointed to Valarie.

She did not deny it. She exhaled slowly, as if acknowledging an inevitable equation.

“I heard the man; he sneezed, and so I realised what he was up to. But he did not know about the priest's hole, and the silly beggar built his false room with the doorway inside. I went outside and blocked up the small broken brick and then used the gas bottles from the fire to knock him out. My plan was to leave him near the edge and give him a fright when he woke up. Imagine my surprise when the police arrived and told me that a body was at the foot of the cliff.”

Grayson walked over to Valarie. “You had already planned to have the place burgled, and this man and his friends just happened to have planned their job at the same time. You need money; the insurance would have paid out. And you would have managed to get most of the good stuff back at knockdown prices. But, tell me please, just how were you going to get everything down to the boat?”

Valarie laughed, loud and mad. “At the rear near the entrance to the priest’s hole is another well-hidden hole. It goes partway down the cliff and comes out into a cave most of the way down; the men would have winched the pieces they were to sell onto the boat. This house was once used as a staging post for stolen goods and my grandfather was a pirate and smuggler. Everything else would be safe until we returned, and a kind local would have discovered the paintings and the Chippendale in some barn.”

The case ended not in triumph, but in a lowering hush. The house remained silent as ever, its walls innocent to the eye but full

of human calculation. The cliff stayed indifferent. The tide came and went.

And somewhere in the stone and dust of Whetstone House, the echo of a man who had once believed he could wait out the world lingered, sealed not by his own ambition alone but by the ruthless practicality of the one person who understood that secrecy is not merely kept.

It is enforced, and usually by the last person you would expect.

Detective Reginald Grayson headed home to Wimbledon, another feather in his already overflowing cap, and had kippers for breakfast the next morning.

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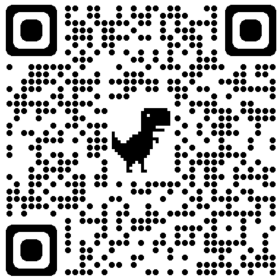

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About the Maker

Every file in The Evidence Table begins the same way, with a blank sheet of paper and a simple question:

"What would this investigation have looked like if it had been preserved in an archive?"

I'm Barrie J. Wakeford, the writer, illustrator and bookbinder behind The Evidence Table.

My working life has always revolved around precision. I began my career as a jeweller in London's Hatton Garden, making and repairing fine jewellery for private clients and productions for television and film. Later, I spent more than twenty years travelling throughout Europe installing and servicing industrial machinery.

Although the work changed, the mindset remained the same: careful planning, patience, problem solving and an appreciation for how things are made.

Today, from my home on Spain's Costa Blanca, I bring those same skills to a very different kind of workshop.

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Whether you're following Claire M. Williams through a modern investigation, opening a Department 14 espionage file or rediscovering a classic mystery, my aim is always the same: to create stories that reward curiosity and invite you to become part of the investigation.

When I'm not writing or working at the binding bench, you'll usually find me sketching, exploring Spain's quieter corners or driving my classic Mini Moke in search of the next story waiting to be filed.

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